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## Whither Reconstruction Historiography?

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

### INTRODUCTION

Professor E. Merton Coulter's *The South During Reconstruction 1865-1877*<sup>1</sup> is widely considered a significant contribution to reconstruction historiography. For a generation, now, students of American history have been turning to cooperative historical writing in the effort to cope with the growing body of source materials that defy satisfactory and comprehensive treatment by a single author. The first major effort to write a cooperative history of the South was undertaken in 1909 by Julian A. C. Chandler and others.<sup>2</sup> This present effort, *A History of the South*, is under the editorship of Professor Coulter and Professor Wendell H. Stephenson and is being sponsored by the Louisiana State University Press, its publisher, and the Littlefield Fund for Southern History of the University of Texas. Its contributors are among the South's most distinguished historians, and its ten volumes will cover the period from 1607 to 1946.

Ellis Merton Coulter, a professor of history at the University of Georgia, is the author of many works on Southern history. His *Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky*<sup>3</sup> is regarded as the definitive work on that subject, while his *College Life in the Old*

*South*<sup>4</sup> is unique in the field of Southern educational history. His fellow historians have recognized his contributions on numerous occasions, and he has served as the president of the Agricultural History Society and of the Southern Historical Association. *The South During Reconstruction* has been widely reviewed and, for the most part, the chorus of praise has contained few reservations. Writing in the *New York Times*, James G. Randall said, "Taking a difficult subject, one of the South's most distinguished historians has subjected it to fresh investigation, and has come through with a competent, well-documented, and readable treatment."<sup>5</sup> Paul Hutchinson wrote in the *Christian Century*, "This is not the first time that the history of the reconstruction period has been written. Yet rarely has the story been told with more wealth of incident and historical integrity. The fact that a southern historian can write with so little partisanship or passion is another proof that time is a great healer."<sup>6</sup>

The praise of Professor Coulter's new work was as great in the professional journals as in the lay periodicals. In a leading journal, Wirt Armistead Cate indicated that there was some evidence of faulty perspective and interpretation, but he added that the "study sets a high standard for the forthcoming volumes. . . . Though

<sup>1</sup>E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947.

<sup>2</sup>Julian A. C. Chandler (ed.), *The South in the Building of the Nation*, 13 vols. Richmond: The Southern Historical Publication Society, 1909-13.

<sup>3</sup>E. Merton Coulter, *Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926.

<sup>4</sup>\_\_\_\_\_, *College Life in the Old South*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928.

<sup>5</sup>The *New York Times Book Review*, December 21, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>*Christian Century*, Jan. 28, 1948, p. 110.

sometimes drawn too exclusively from Southern sources, the documentation is accurate, and it is unlikely that future historians will materially alter the author's basic conclusions."<sup>7</sup> J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, a well-known historian of the Reconstruction, wrote, "The study—a tremendously difficult task—is well done throughout, and covers the case as effectively as is possible in a volume of this length. Its historical quality and its new approach make it a significant contribution, and too high praise cannot be given the author's calm and dispassionate treatment of the whole subject." In conclusion, he stated, "The work is a consummation devoutly to be praised."<sup>8</sup> Frank L. Owsley endorsed the volume with the following comment, "The author, by the large-scale use of contemporary southern newspapers, periodicals, and personal letters and biographical material, has been able to catch the reactions of the southern white people to reconstruction. Often, of course, this gives the book a sharp and bitter tone, which must not be confused with the author's outlook; there are few historians today whose approach is more impartial and unemotional than Coulter's."<sup>9</sup>

One of the few reviewers who took serious exception to the construction of the volume and some of the author's conclusions was Allan Nevins. Among other things he was not satisfied with the treatment of the Ku Klux Klan, or with the treatment of

the Negro, or with the author's discussion of why the white Southerners were not left free to guide the section's destinies. Admitting that a "just treatment of this crowded and chaotic period makes heavy demands upon any writer's scholarship, judgment, and literary skill," Professor Nevins concluded that "Mr. Coulter's book ably meets most of these demands."<sup>10</sup>

Because of the great significance of *The South During Reconstruction* it deserves a more extensive and critical examination than it has received. The kind of analysis which Professor Nevins undertook needs to be extended with a view to seeing if, finally, the definitive study of the region during these fateful years has been written. It is an extremely controversial period in which journalists, novelists, and historians have labored almost ceaselessly. Persons representing every conceivable point of view have examined one or several phases of it, while many monographs on special problems have appeared. A new and exhaustive study of the period has been greatly needed for many years. If this work proposes to answer that need, it deserves a serious examination in the light of the best canons of historical research and writing.

#### THE APPROACH

Coulter approaches his task with the point of view that, in addition to politics, there are many phases of everyday life in the South during Reconstruction that deserve consideration. He has, perhaps, given more attention to urban growth, recreation,

<sup>7</sup>*The American Historical Review* 53:565-67, Ap 1948.

<sup>8</sup>*The Journal of Southern History* 14: 134-36, F 1948.

<sup>9</sup>*Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 258:153-54, J1 1948.

<sup>10</sup>*Saturday Review of Literature* 31:19, 26-28, F 14, 1948.

and culture than has any other student of the period. While he thereby seeks to broaden the base of the Reconstruction story he is not inclined to reexamine certain other phases of it in the light of recent studies. He contends that "there can be no sensible departure from the well-known facts of the Reconstruction program as it was applied to the South. No amount of revision can write away the grievous mistakes made in this abnormal period of American history." (p. xi.) With hardly more than a shrug of his shoulder, the author, thus, swept aside the findings of several worthy studies, including those by Howard K. Beale, Francis B. Simkins, R. H. Woody, Horace Mann Bond, Vernon Wharton, W. E. B. DuBois, and Roger W. Shugg.<sup>11</sup> The question that immediately arises is, "What are the well-known facts of Reconstruction?" Are they the facts on which the Reconstruction historians of the early part of this century based their conclusions? Has not the intervening generation of scholarly activity provided

no alteration in the view of the "dean" of the historians of the Reconstruction who described life in the South at the height of the Radical period as "a social and political system in which all the forces that made for civilization were dominated by a mass of barbarous freedmen"?<sup>12</sup> Are the well-known facts to be gained from those historians who have treated the Reconstruction as a "melodrama involving wild-eyed conspirators whose acts are best described in red flashes upon a canvas"?<sup>13</sup> Is it not possible that time has not only served to "heal" feelings of hurt, but also to provide the serious student with information and perspective with which to reinterpret the period?

The author asserts that he has "chosen to write this volume in the atmosphere and spirit of the times here portrayed rather than to measure the South of Reconstruction by present-day standards." (p. xi). As commendable as such an effort is, it has limitations and dangers that are extremely difficult to overcome. Every serious historian seeks to re-create the period in which he writes. He must be conscious, however, of the complexity of any event or set of circumstances and of the danger of focusing attention on certain events to the exclusion of others that might have some significant bearing. In his effort to write in the spirit and atmosphere of the period the author is not relieved of the responsibility of seeking to determine, by all of the acceptable principles of internal criticism, the

<sup>11</sup>Howard K. Beale, "On Rewriting Reconstruction History," *The American Historical Review* 45:807-27, J1 1941; Francis B. Simkins and Robert H. Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932; Francis B. Simkins, "New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History* 5:49-61, F 1939; Horace M. Bond, "Social and Economic Forces in Alabama Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History* 23:290-348, J1 1938; Horace M. Bond, *Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel*. Washington: Associated Publishers, 1939; Vernon Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865-1890*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1947; W. E. B. DuBois, "Reconstruction and Its Benefits," *American Historical Review* 15:781-99, J1 1910; W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1935; and Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*. University: Louisiana State University Press, 1939.

<sup>12</sup>William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907. Pp. 212.

<sup>13</sup>Simkins, "New Viewpoints," *loc. cit.*, p. 51.



nature of the atmosphere and the forces that created it. There is, moreover, a grave danger of the author's injecting his point of view or of misconstructing the period when he is not satisfied with permitting the characters to speak for themselves and feels called upon to explain and, perhaps, to extend their feelings. For example, in describing the South Carolina Convention, in which Negroes sat, Coulter quotes a Northern newspaperman as saying that it was "barbarism overwhelming civilization by physical force" and "a wonder and a shame to modern civilization." Then, out of quotations, the author declares, "A black parliament representing a white constituency—the only example in all history!" (p. 148). Even if it is not pertinent to inquire into the logic of one who is alarmed because Negroes, who, incidentally, constituted a considerable proportion of the population, were in the legislature "representing a white constituency," it is of considerable importance to know if the sentiments represent the views of the newspaperman or those of the author of *The South During Reconstruction*, or both.<sup>14</sup> There is no way of knowing where the atmosphere of that period ends and the atmosphere of this period begins.

In another statement, which is an important expression of the point of view of the author, he asserts that, "The Civil War was not worth its cost. . . . What good the war produced

would have come with time in an orderly way; the bad would not have come at all." (p. 1). Since the proof that the good would have come at some future date must, of necessity, be inconclusive it seems to be out of the range of an historian to make such an unsupported prediction. What is more important, however, is that such a point of view falls so far outside the framework of the basic ideology of America, that it might be regarded as a fundamental compromise with freedom. By the same token it could be argued that eventually the American colonies would have become free without a war, or that eventually the Kaiser's schemes to dominate Europe would have gone to his grave with him. But such a point of view has little appreciation for the moral implications of slavery and freedom, of subjugation and independence. It would seem to represent a basic compromise with the American concept of freedom, and there seems to be no more justification for compromising in 1861 than there was in 1775, 1917, or 1941.

#### THE USE OF SOURCES

Coulter, seeking to write in the atmosphere and spirit of the times, seems especially partial to those sources that create a particular kind of atmosphere. The atmosphere is one in which federal troops stride over the South with a merciless vengeance, irresponsible Negroes exhibit a complete lack of restraint in their new freedom, and Southern whites writhe under the heel of Negro-Scalawag-Carpetbag rule. Thus, Southern periodicals such as the *Macon American Union*, the *Charleston Courier*, and

<sup>14</sup>As a matter of fact the statement, almost exactly as it appears in Coulter, is in J. S. Pike, *The Prostrate State*. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1874, p. 15, and Coulter cites Pike as a reference. But he does not quote from the work nor does he make it clear whose views are being expressed.

*De Bow's Review* are quoted extensively not only for atmosphere but for statistical information and accounts of incidents in which there might be another side. There is a good deal of reliance, too, on the pronouncements of such works as James Pike's *The Prostrate State* and Myrta Avery's *Dixie After the War* which are difficult to equal in their bias in behalf of the South's cause and their vituperation with respect to the Negro during the period.

While the work by Professor Coulter reflects an extensive use of source materials, there is no indication of his having approximated an exhaustion of the available materials, many of which have scarcely been used by students of the period and which might contain some very important but not well-known facts. The records of contemporary articulate Negroes are almost completely ignored. The author writes contemptuously of Negro conventions, but he gives no evidence of having examined the minutes of the conventions. While the accounts in the Southern newspapers might convey the atmosphere of the whites as they reacted to the conventions, it would only be fair to seek to create the atmosphere of the conventions themselves if, as Coulter claims, he sought to discover what the aspirations of the Negroes were. (p. xi).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Regarding the Convention of Freedmen in Raleigh in September 1865, Coulter says, "This convention, like most Negro gatherings, partook of a politico-religious nature with shouts and sobs and at times with fights waxing hot over such trivialities as who should be the seventh vice-president." (p. 60). This description follows very closely the account given by Sidney Andrews, who attended the convention. But Andrews adds, "Yet, when all these things are admitted, there is to be commended the sincere earnestness of the delegates as a body, the liberal

In a similar manner the biographies and autobiographies of Negroes were overlooked, their innumerable public and private utterances are ignored; and there is no use of the reports of Negro office-holders. The reports of federal, state, and local officials might have been used to balance, if not to neutralize, the criticisms of these same officials by Southern newspapers. If judgment is to be passed on the Freedmen's Bureau, it would seem that some consideration might have been given to the numerous reports made by the Bureau and its officials. Certainly, the official reports, even if Coulter should undertake to impeach their validity, should receive as much attention with respect to the work of the Freedmen's Bureau as, say, the *Atlanta Daily Opinion* or the *Little Rock Weekly Arkansas Gazette*.<sup>16</sup>

While Coulter seeks to portray the period of the Reconstruction by letting the sources speak for themselves, wherever possible, he takes the opportunity, on occasions, to test the valid-

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spirit of their debates, the catholicity of their views of duty in the present emergency, the patient and cheerful tone of heart and head which prevailed, and the unfailing good-humor which bridged all passions and overcame all difficulties . . . on the whole the Convention did its work with commendable directness; and there were a number of speeches, and one or two lengthy debates, that would have been creditable to any white man's convention with even picked delegates." Sidney Andrews, *The South Since the War*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866, pp. 124, 126.

<sup>16</sup>Professor Coulter rarely cites the only general work on the Bureau, Paul S. Peirce, *The Freedmen's Bureau*. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1904. Although he could have secured statistics on the activities of the Bureau from this work, if he found it impossible to use either the published reports or the great mass of unpublished material in the National Archives, he nowhere gives a full picture of the expenditures of the Bureau or of its varied services to destitute whites as well as to Negroes.

ity of the sources to determine whether they are impeachable. That is a commendable exercise of the function of historical criticism. It is altogether possible, however, to violate that function when only those sources that do not support one's point of view are subjected to impeachment. After the close of the Civil War several persons visited the South to study conditions and reported their findings to the President. Among them were Carl Schurz, Benjamin C. Truman, General U. S. Grant, and Harvey M. Watterson. All except Schurz found little or no feeling of hostility and thought that the South was ready for restoration. Coulter obviously took serious exception to the findings of Schurz, and, therefore, before commenting on Schurz's observations he undertook to impeach his character and discredit him altogether. He described him as a "reformer to the extent of revolutionist, German-born, and lacking a common sense produced by American upbringing." (p. 27). Even if one overlooked Coulter's obviously subjective appraisal of Schurz and concluded that the German-born American was unfit to make a fair study of the South, what of the other observers? They escape with no discussion of their qualities or qualifications whatever. It was enough for the author to refer to Truman as "the President's New England secretary," to describe Watterson as the "father of 'Marse Henry,' the famous newspaper editor," and to say nothing at all of General Grant. (p. 28). If Schurz was so incapable of making critical and objective observations in the South, is not there a bare possibility that, for example, Grant's abil-

ity to study conditions might be seriously challenged?

It is so easy, in the handling of sources, to present a picture that, at best, is only a half-truth. In describing the Negroes in the Reconstruction conventions and legislatures, Coulter cites none of the several references that make favorable comments regarding the conduct of the freedmen. He is content to quote the *Atlanta Georgia Weekly Opinion's* description of a Negro in the following manner, "The arrogant presumption, ignorance, bullying and impertinence of this Negro, is becoming intolerable." (p. 134). Of the South Carolina House in 1873 the best that Coulter could say was that "The Negro legislators were of all shades, from the lightest mulattoes to the blackest negroids, fresh from the kitchen and the field, in clothing ranging from secondhand black frock coats to the 'coarse and dirty garments of the field.' " (p. 147). More important than their varied shades, it would seem, were their varied backgrounds. Some were former field hands, while others were college and university graduates. The Negro speaker of the House at that time has been described by the closest students of South Carolina Reconstruction as "one of the most creditable lawyers of the state for his age."<sup>17</sup> The comment of the *Charleston Daily News* regarding the South Carolina convention of 1868, was that "Beyond all question, the best men in the convention are the colored members. Considering the influences under which they were called together, and their imperfect acquaintance with parliamentary law, they have displayed, for the most part, re-

<sup>17</sup>Simkins and Woody, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

markable moderation and dignity."<sup>18</sup> Although Coulter relied heavily on Edward King's account of conditions in the South and refers to it as "particularly valuable" (p. 398), perhaps he did not find King's description of Negro leaders in the South Carolina legislature "particularly valuable." It serves, however, to point up another side of the picture. In part, King said, "The President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House, both colored, were elegant and accomplished men, highly educated, who would have creditably presided over any commonwealth's legislative assembly."<sup>19</sup>

In the effort to show how grievously the South had been wounded by the war and its aftermath, Coulter presented a table entitled, "Per Capita Wealth of Former Slave States compared with that of Northern and Middle Western States, 1860-1880." It shows that Louisiana, for example, had fallen from the second position in 1860 to the thirty-seventh in 1880 and that South Carolina had moved from third in the earlier year to forty-fifth twenty years later. He reminds the reader that "the change in the status of the Negroes produced an important part of the decline. It not only destroyed over a billion dollars worth of personal property in slaves, but also added the poverty-stricken Negroes to the population on which per capita wealth was reckoned." (pp. 192-193). One wonders what value the table is, since admittedly it presents an abnormal picture with re-

spect to Southern wealth. It should be remembered that in 1860 the South had every advantage in the reckoning of per capita wealth, since Negro slaves were valued but not counted. The author's remarks, moreover, do not take into consideration the tremendous accumulation of capital wealth in the North that resulted from the economic revolution. There would have been a considerable change in the rank of Southern states even if they had kept their slaves.

The author's inclination to indict and discredit factors making for the improvement of the status of Negroes led him, on occasion, to make generalizations which do not seem to be supported by the evidence he presents. In describing the work of the Freedmen's Bureau Courts, he says, "They took up all matters relating to freedmen and if a white man were concerned especially in the matter of contracts the Negro usually came out winner." (p. 79). This is such a sweeping generalization that it is most unfortunate that the author did not feel called upon to support it with careful and adequate documentation. While perhaps no exhaustive study has been made of the operation of the courts, the reports of the assistant commissioners of the Bureau in the several states and the study of the Bureau by Paul S. Peirce would seem to afford more authoritative and complete information than the Southern newspapers which the author cited. In a similar generalization the author asserts that "Education was, in fact, a fad which soon lost its novelty for the majority of Negroes." (p. 86). Since some attendance figures are available it would have been appro-

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Simkins and Woody, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup>Edward King, *The Great South*. Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1875, p. 460.

priate for the author to have introduced them in support of his contention. Even if attendance declined, as it did in some places, it was not always because of the lack of interest. Other factors were the lack of schools, which Coulter mentioned, the preoccupation with economic survival, and the open hostility, in some places, to Negroes' attending school.

Perhaps the most serious and grievous offense that an historian can commit is either to misquote or to distort his sources. Here, again, the offense stems, in all probability, from an overweening desire to produce illustrations to support a particular point of view. While this anxiety might understandably lead one to misinterpret a source, it should never become so ungovernable as to cause a student striving for objectivity to misquote or to distort a source. Yet, Coulter appears to have succumbed to the temptation to misquote some of his sources, presumably in order that they might fit into the picture he was seeking to draw. In discussing the educational situation in Louisiana, the author states, "An observer of the scene in Louisiana [Edward King] found that the superintendent of education, a mulatto, was *so ignorant and careless of his duties*<sup>20</sup> that he did not know how many schools were in his state." (p. 323). This is a clear-cut distortion of the observer's statement. The following is the statement by King as it appears in his account of his travels:

"The present condition of the educational system in Louisiana is encouraging although disfigured from evils which arise from the political disorganization. The State superin-

tendent of education, at the time of my visit was a mulatto gentleman of evident culture, seeming, indeed, quite up to the measure of his task, if he only had the means to perform it. He could not tell me how many schools were in operation in the State; nor how much the increase had been since the war. *There was, he explained, the greatest difficulty in procuring returns from the interior districts, even the annual reports being forwarded tardily, or sometimes not at all.*"<sup>21</sup>

There seems to be no justification whatever in Coulter's representing King as having found that the superintendent was "ignorant and careless."<sup>22</sup>

Once again, in Coulter's discussion of crop productivity after the Civil War, Edward King is made to provide an unfair share of the evidence to support a conclusion that the author had reached. Coulter says, "A

<sup>21</sup>King, *op. cit.*, p. 97. My italics.

<sup>22</sup>Regarding marriage Professor Coulter says, "Negroes found it difficult to treat marriage as a permanent arrangement, and for some years after the war there were few marriages. In thirty-one Mississippi counties there were in 1866 only 564 marriages; in 1870, the habit of marrying having taken on a stronger hold, there were 3,427." (p. 53). The information was secured from Robert Somers, *The Southern States Since the War*. London: The Macmillan Company, 1871, p. 251. But Somers was misquoted. Somers gave the figure of 564 as the number of marriages in 1865, the year of emancipation, not 1866. Somers added that the number "rose the following year [1866] to 3,679, and with the exception of 1868, when it fell to 2,802, has kept very near that mark ever since. The number of marriage licenses to negroes in 1870 was 3,427." The following remark by Somers is significantly different from the point of view of Professor Coulter: "It is not the less gratifying that negroes, when freed from all control, should have entered into the marriage state of their own accord at this ample rate, more especially as the cost of a marriage licence had been increased from one dollar under the old system to three dollars under the new. . . ." See, also, the discussion of Negro marriages in Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour*. New York: Moore, Wiltach & Baldwin, 1866, pp. 126-27.

<sup>20</sup>My italics.



careful observer, after traveling through the South in 1873 and 1874, concluded that plantations were producing only from one third to a half of their ante-bellum crops." (p. 95). The actual statement by King was not based on a general conclusion that he had reached regarding productivity over the entire South. Rather, it was merely his report of what he had found on *one* plantation, Clairmont, in Louisiana. He said, "on this Clairmont, in 1860, the owner raised 1,000 bales of cotton and 8,000 bushels of corn; now he raises about 500 bales, and hardly any corn."<sup>23</sup>

Another Northern traveler whose observations have been taken out of context and distorted was Sidney Andrews who visited the South shortly after the War's end. Coulter says, "A Northerner traveling in the South in the summer of 1865 [Sidney Andrews] was convinced that 'the race is, on a large scale, ignorantly sacrificing its own good for the husks of vagabondage'." (pp. 50-51). The impression is thus conveyed that Andrews was writing that Negroes in general were unwise in abandoning the plantations and going away to search for a better life. It is an erroneous impression. Andrews was speaking of a particular section of *one* state. In part, he says, "I know very well that every white man, woman, and child in the whole State [of Georgia] is ready to swear that every negro is worse off now than before he was freed. I accept no such evidence; but hundreds of conversations with negroes of every class in at least a

dozen towns of this section [Central Georgia] have convinced me that the race is, on a large scale, ignorantly sacrificing its own material good for the husks of vagabondage."<sup>24</sup> Andrews shows that he was not willing to generalize this statement with respect to all Negroes when he added, "In South Carolina, as I have already said, where slavery reached its lowest estate, it was not possible for the negro to make his condition worse by striking out for himself. There was scarcely more than a choice between two evils, and he chose that which promised him the most independence."<sup>25</sup> Here, then, are examples of Coulter's misrepresenting and distorting his sources in a manner that seems, indeed, unusual for a serious scholar who writes about a period in which the facts are allegedly so well known as to need no alteration or revision.

#### THE MATTER OF OBJECTIVITY

Not only should the historian's conclusions be based on adequate and reliable evidence, but they should also reflect a judiciousness in keeping with the temperament of one disciplined in objectivity and preciseness. Yet, the observation of Nevins that the author has done less than justice to the record of the Negro in Congress and in state offices is merely a suggestion of the limits to which Coulter has gone in his rather systematic effort to discredit the Negro in almost all phases of life during the Reconstruction. Perhaps his discussion of "the fundamental character of the Negro" (p. 95) is justified on the grounds that

<sup>23</sup>King, *op. cit.*, p. 273. Coulter's reference is to page 272. There was no pertinent discussion on that page, and it may be assumed that the correct reference was to page 273.

<sup>24</sup>Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*



there prevailed, during the period, the belief that Negroes had a fundamental character peculiar to them. One gets the impression, from other remarks by Coulter, that he, too, subscribes to the view that Negroes possessed certain inherent traits. The view led him to make some generalizations regarding Negro character and conduct that are as injudicious as they are tenuous. The author makes the extravagant claim that "As a race they [Negroes] were spendthrift and gullible" and adds as if it were an afterthought, "though some were amenable to the advice to save their money." (p. 49). These spendthrift Negroes had, even according to Coulter, put almost \$20,000,000 into one banking system, the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company by 1874 (p. 88) and despite considerable opposition, had acquired 586,664 acres of land in Georgia by 1880. (p. 112).

Coulter's delineation of the character of Negroes even extended to a statement regarding their cleanliness. He said, "Unfortunately for the Negroes freedom meant the loss of certain attentions which they received in slavery, designed to keep them healthy and clean and to prolong their lives. Freed from restraint 'since dis time come,' they tended to become slovenly and careless of their health and cleanliness." (p. 55). While it is extremely difficult to imagine the ante-bellum planters setting up rules and practices of personal hygiene to which slaves had to conform, it is even more difficult to imagine that the whites of the South possessed all the habits of personal hygiene while the Negroes had none. Indeed, it would seem that the observations of one of the travelers

whom Coulter frequently quotes, but not on this subject, were perhaps more accurate. On the subject of cleanliness in the South Sidney Andrews said, "The importance of soap and water as elements in civilization have been much ignored or overlooked. I am thoroughly satisfied that if the people of this state [South Carolina], with all their belongings and surroundings — except such as would be damaged by water — could be thoroughly washed once a week, a year would show a very material advance toward civilization. . . ." Andrews, who traveled extensively in the post-war South, made no reference to any particular race.<sup>26</sup>

Another characteristic which Coulter ascribes to Negroes is excessive emotionalism especially with regard to religion.<sup>27</sup> He says, "Being by nature highly emotional and excitable and now unrestrained by the hand of former masters, they carried their religious exercises to extreme lengths, both in time and content." There follows a description of their services in which the author is as unrestrained as the subjects of his discussion. There is no need to discuss here Coulter's subjective statement with respect to the emotional and excitable nature of Negroes. Although it might be the

<sup>26</sup>Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>27</sup>Professor Coulter also makes reference to the festive spirit of the Negro and describes it as being "native" with him. He says that in freedom this spirit found expression "not only in his religion but also in many societies and lodges, mostly secret, and in holidays which he found and which he made. He loved gala and regalia." (p. 54). This manifestation was hardly a racial trait. Rather it was a national trait which was noticed by many travelers as well as others. See the article by Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Biography of a Nation of Joiners," *American Historical Review* 50:1-25, O 1944.

topic for a discussion *during* the Reconstruction period, it would hardly seem to merit consideration today, in the light of the findings of students of human nature. Nor is there any point in discussing the characteristics of Negro religious exercises. Close students of rural and primitive religions know how remarkably similar they were to the exercises of whites.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it would be difficult to find in the accounts of Negro religious meetings any that would surpass those of the whites in the period. Simkins and Woody made a proper analysis of the situation in one state when they said, "The religious practices of the Negroes seldom got beyond an application of the imagery of the Bible to the culture which the race had acquired in South Carolina. Their religion was as native and as orthodox as that of the white Methodist and Baptist. . . ." <sup>29</sup>

Another indictment of Negroes by Coulter was for their alleged addiction to alcoholic beverages. He says, "The greatest difficulty the South had in handling its liquor problem related to the control of drinking by Negroes. . . . With little experience of self-control they would spend their last piece of money for a drink of whisky, and they would break in and steal this article before all else." (p. 336). It need only be said that there is no reason why this generalization, which excludes whites from censure, should be uncritically accepted. There is, moreover, some basis for disagreement with Coulter. Other authorities

have contended that the Negro's "taste for strong drink was not so avid as that of the whites." They also pointed out that white "farmers spent their money as readily for drink as they did for family necessities." "A prosecuting officer asserted that drinking was much less a cause of crime among the blacks than among the whites. 'Drinking,' he added, 'is not a very prevalent crime among Negroes.' " <sup>30</sup> Drinking was a serious problem among all groups during the Reconstruction period. It must be described in such a manner if the proper atmosphere of the period is to be recreated. <sup>31</sup>

The manner of Coulter's impeachment of the character of individual Negroes reflects, further, an injudicious temperament. For example, Henry M. Turner is the special object of the ire and invective of the author. On one occasion he is described as "Georgia's *nègre terrible*." (p. 60). Later he is referred to as "ubiquitous preacher, politician, and crook." (p. 98). An unnamed carpetbagger is quoted as having characterized him as "a licentious robber and counterfeiter, a vulgar blackguard, a sacrilegious profaner of God's name, and a most consummate hypocrite." (p.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 25, 322, 362. One shrewd observer said, "The blacks were unquestionably less addicted to ardent spirits than the Southern whites; but I suspect that it was mainly because, up to the emancipation, they were kept from it in a measure by police regulations, and because they were as yet too poor to purchase much of it." John William DeForest, *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction* (ed. by J. H. Croushare and D. M. Potter). New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948, p. 103. This observation was originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* 22: 8 1868.

<sup>31</sup>See the account of a drunken brawl by whites in Robert Somers, *The Southern States Since the War*. London, 1871, p. 127.

<sup>28</sup>Frederick M. Davenport, *Primitive Traits in Religious Revivals*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917.

<sup>29</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 409.

146). Nowhere is there any specific evidence to show why this man who became Bishop of the A.M.E. Church and Chancellor of Morris Brown College was regarded by Coulter as a "crook." The only occasion on which the author permitted Turner to escape his merciless attack was when Turner spoke out against the hated labor agent who was attempting to lure Negroes off the plantation. To Coulter, Turner was, on this occasion, a "special advisor for his flock in Georgia," who "did valiant service in quieting the stirring freedmen." (p. 99).

The height of injudiciousness is reached by Coulter when he says that after the collapse of the Reconstruction in South Carolina "High colored officials returned to their old positions of streetsweepers, waiters, and field hands." (p. 373). The post-Reconstruction careers of the South Carolina leaders simply do not bear out this fanciful assertion. F. L. Cardozo, the State treasurer in South Carolina at the time of the "overthrow," moved to Washington where he became an auditor in the post office department. Later he became the principal of a high school and remained a man of influence and prestige until his death. Robert Smalls, who was in Congress in 1876, remained there until 1879. He returned to Congress in 1881 for three terms. When he retired from Congress he became collector of the Port of Beaufort where, with the exception of Cleveland's second term, he remained until 1913. R. H. Cain, who was in Congress, remained there until 1879. In the following year he was elected Bishop of the A.M.E. Church and held that position until his death in 1887. Robert B. Elliott,

who had been in Congress earlier in the period and who lost the race for attorney-general in 1876, became a special agent of the Treasury Department in New Orleans. Later he resumed the practice of the law and remained active in his profession until his death in 1884. Joseph H. Rainey, who served in Congress for five terms, was replaced by a Democrat in 1877. He was then employed for four years by the Treasury Department. Beginning in 1881 he conducted a banking and brokerage business for five years in Washington. He died in 1887.<sup>32</sup> This does not exhaust the list, nor is this to deny that some Negro leaders became menial workers after 1877.<sup>33</sup> It merely calls attention to the fact that Coulter's assertion was extravagant and injudicious.

It does not appear that Coulter's discussion of the Black Codes is either sufficiently extensive or critical. It cannot be gainsaid that an examination and understanding of the Black Codes are essential to an understanding of the early part of the Reconstruction period. Yet, there is nowhere any extensive discussion of the provisions of the Codes. Some provi-

<sup>32</sup>For accounts of the later careers of some of the Negro leaders of South Carolina see Simkins and Woody, *op. cit.*, pp. 545-47; A. A. Taylor, *The Negro in South Carolina During the Reconstruction*. Washington: The Associated Publishers, 1924, pp. 290-307; *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928, pp. 774-5, 941, 1440, 1444, 1532; and *Dictionary of American Biography*. New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1928-1937, 3:403-404; 15:327; and 17:224.

<sup>33</sup>Former Lieutenant Governor A. J. Ransier, for example, did become a laborer on the streets of Charleston. The report that Lieutenant Governor Richard Gleaves became a hotel waiter in New York appears to be unconfirmed. Simkins and Woody, *op. cit.*, pp. 545-46.

sions are given in a footnote (pp. 39-40), but the textual discussion is largely a defense of the laws passed in the period before the Radicals took charge. Coulter says, "There can be no doubt that the fundamental purpose in the minds of the lawmakers was to advance the fortunes of the Negroes rather than retard them or try to push them back into slavery." (p. 38). In a cursory discussion the author defended the exclusion of Negroes from jury service and criticized as "poor logic" the exclusion of Negro testimony in a case where a white person was the defendant. He explained that, "No law could force a jury to believe Negro testimony, but at times it might be valuable in establishing facts, and by allowing it where Negroes were defendants it actually gave Negroes greater protection than whites." (p. 39). Then, Coulter blandly brushes the Black Codes aside with the statement, "Whatever anyone might have thought, the question was in fact academic, for they were never actually put into effect." (p. 40).

The question of the Black Codes was not merely academic for at least two significant reasons. In the first place they reflect, better than dozens of statements of sentiment or feeling, the actual attitude of the Southern leaders toward Negroes at the end of the War.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps they did not intend to push Negroes back into slavery, but in South Carolina, where employment opportunities were legally proscribed and where Negro farm workers could not leave the premises without the express permission of

their "masters," who had the privilege of "moderately" whipping servants under eighteen, it was close to ante-bellum relationships. In Mississippi, where Negroes were prevented from renting or leasing farm lands and where they were given less than two months to find a home and employment or suffer penalties, Negroes could hardly be described as enjoying freedom.<sup>35</sup> There were Southern contemporaries who severely criticized the Black Codes, and it is surprising to find an historian today whose views are more tolerant of the Codes than "the best thought of the state" of Mississippi at that time.<sup>36</sup>

The Black Codes, moreover, *were* enforced in some places. In Jackson and in Hinds County, Mississippi, for example, "the Act that required freedmen without a yearly contract to secure licenses was rigidly enforced." "In Vicksburg as late as March, 1868, more than 60 Negroes were arbitrarily arrested and thrown into jail on the charge of vagrancy. . . ."<sup>37</sup> Coulter offers no proof that the Codes were not enforced except to assert that the Freedmen's Bureau and the United States Army prevented their enforcement. Yet, it is certainly one of the well-known facts of the period that neither the Bureau nor the Army was

<sup>35</sup>See the criticism of the Codes in Shugg, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>36</sup>See Wharton, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90, for local contemporary criticism of the Mississippi Black Code. The editor of the *Columbus Sentinel*, for example, called the framers of the Code "as complete a set of Political Goths as were ever turned loose to work destruction upon a State." Another said that they were "a set of men who seem bent on following the dictates of every blind prejudice, let the consequences be ever so ruinous to the State and the people."

<sup>37</sup>Wharton, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup>See Bond, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

always successful in enforcing their own orders.<sup>38</sup>

With respect to the acquisition of land by Negroes, Coulter says, "Most whites favored Negro ownership of land if they got it in a legal way. . . . The statement, often retailed, that Southerners did not want the Negro to own land, and that they successfully kept him from it to a large extent, is based on very slight fact. Land for sale was so plentiful and so cheap that it would have been practically impossible to deny the sale of it to a Negro who could pay for it. In most cases where a planter refused to sell land to a Negro, it turned out that the Negro wanted a choice spot in the midst of the plantation, or was making some other unreasonable demand which would have been as quickly denied to a white man." (p. 111). It must be remembered, that the laws enacted by the Southern whites immediately after the war so proscribed Negroes that it was almost impossible for them to secure employment by which they could gain the means to purchase land, however cheap. But there was also opposition to the sale of land to Negroes. Coulter himself admits it when he says that the poor whites, "fearing the competition of Negro landowners . . . threatened planters who would sell or rent land to them." (p. 164). Perhaps there is still another reason, provided by Coulter, why whites were opposed to Negroes owning land. He says, "There was a certain political significance in a Negro's owning land. As

long as he was a laborer his employer could hold an uncomfortable and restraining hand over him when he cast his ballot." (p. 111). Wharton says that a white landowner who would make arrangements to sell a tract of land to a Negro "brought on himself the enmity of his fellows."<sup>39</sup> It is to be remembered that, in Mississippi, the first state legislature after the end of the war enacted a law prohibiting the sale of farm land to Negroes. It did not go into effect, but it doubtless illustrates the attitude which many planters continued to hold. A Northern observer noticed in 1865 that in the upper part of the Charleston District "the planters are quietly holding meetings at which they pass resolutions not to sell land to Negroes. . . . In Beaufort District they not only refuse to sell land to Negroes, but also refuse to rent it to them; and many black men have been told that they would be shot if they leased land and undertook to work for themselves."<sup>40</sup>

When Coulter describes Radical Reconstruction as having a "glimmering resemblance to the later cults of Fascism and Nazism" (p. 114), he is no longer even attempting to create the atmosphere of the period under study, but is measuring conditions by present day standards, a procedure which, at the outset, he denied to himself. (p. xi). While there seems to be nothing wrong with such a procedure, under the circumstances, it does open up the opportunity to examine his contention that Radical Reconstruction was fascistic. It might

<sup>38</sup>See Wharton's discussion, in which he tells how officials in Mississippi ignored an army order to forbid the prosecution of Negroes where the law discriminated against them. Wharton, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60. See also the discussion of hostility to Negroes owning land in Reid, *op. cit.*, pp. 564-65.

<sup>40</sup>Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 206.



be contended, and with considerable logic, that the ante-bellum South had an even greater "glimmering resemblance to the later cults of Fascism and Nazism." There were, indeed, many of the elements: an oppressed race; the great and continuing drive for *Lebensraum*; the annihilation of almost every vestige of free thought and free speech; and the enthusiastic glorification of the martial spirit. Perhaps, then, the North, enjoying a more favorable ideological position, may be regarded as accomplishing an overthrow of "Nazism" and what Professor Coulter sees as a forerunner of the twentieth century "cults" was, instead, the "denazification process" in which a firm and, at times, unreasonable stand was taken by the victor. At any rate, the mere suggestion by the author presents many possibilities for the reinterpretation of the period.

#### A SECOND LOOK

On the basis of the preceding discussion it is not too much to say that one can take serious exception to *The South During Reconstruction* on several specific grounds: First of all, the author's point of view may be challenged in rejecting most of the so-called revisionist findings and in confusing his own attitudes with those of contemporaries under the claim of writing in the spirit and atmosphere of the period. In the second place, he has handled some of his sources in a manner not in keeping with the best canons of the discipline when he selected his materials from sources that supported his point of view while overlooking others that might have shed considerable, though different, light on the period; when he general-

ized from inadequate sources; and when he distorted some sources and took others out of context. In the third place, some of his conclusions seemed lacking in judiciousness and objectivity when he described many phases of Negro life in sweeping and unsupported generalities that do not stand up under careful examination; when he failed to discuss critically and exhaustively so crucial a matter as the Black Codes; and when he revealed an inconsistent as well as a tenuous position in his discussion of Negro landowning.

*The South During Reconstruction* suffered not only from the weaknesses previously discussed, but it left much to be desired in other respects. Briefly, it would seem that it was necessary for the author to have remembered more frequently that Reconstruction was a national problem, although his main attention was properly focused on the South. The war's aftermath was seen and felt all over the nation, and the South was not immune to the forces and circumstances operating outside the region. There were the economic forces, many of which originated in New York or Boston but which exerted considerable influence in many Southern communities.<sup>41</sup> There were the constitutional and political aspects, centering in the struggle between the President and Congress, which had more to do with the outcome of Reconstruction than meets the eye of the casual observer. There were, also, the social aspects, which were tied up not only with the movement to elevate the conditions of

<sup>41</sup>See the discussion in connection with this point in Bond, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-62.



workingmen in the South but were a part of the inter-continental revolutionary movement to improve the conditions of working classes in many lands.

One would have welcomed a more adequate discussion of the results of Reconstruction. It should not be sufficient merely to describe the celebrations attending "redemption." To what extent was the South economically and physically rehabilitated by the end of Reconstruction? How was the school system functioning and who had assumed responsibility for promoting the education of the South's youth? What was the significance of the Reconstruction constitutions for democracy in the South? There is a palpable connection between the answers to these questions and a final evaluation of the period under study.

This work by Professor Coulter is another chapter, if not a milestone, in Reconstruction historiography. It is as valuable in the history of history as it is in the history of the Reconstruction. The questionable historiographical practices employed by the author and his summary rejection of historians whose findings fail to support his views lead one to ask, "In what direction is Reconstruction historiography moving?" It is to be hoped that those who continue to study the Reconstruction, regardless of their point of view, will not summarily reject or accept this work in an uncritical manner. Rather, it is to be hoped that they will use it, both its polemics and its history, for the advancement of Reconstruction historiography.